

PREPARING FOR A CAREER IN THE FIRE SERVICE

HOW TO BECOME A FIREFIGHTER



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Welcome!



You've gotten this far because you decided to explore becoming a firefighter. You may have researched it a little by calling fire departments, reading information online or asking people who are already "on the job." If you've done that, you've probably received a ton of information, and in some cases, misinformation, which can be quite confusing. This document will hopefully set you on a clear path to becoming a firefighter.

You probably already know the rigors, sacrifices, and risks associated with being a firefighter, so there's no need discussing that here. Rather, we'll focus on the aspects that encompass the path to becoming a firefighter.

Becoming a firefighter is difficult and it's not a job for everyone. The demand of this vocation takes a toll, both emotionally and physically on the individual, but the job can also be extremely rewarding. It takes quite a bit of time and money, but if you're dedicated, you work hard and follow all the appropriate steps, you can make it a reality. Remember, every firefighter in Illinois was once at the exact same point as you are right now.





The DIFFERENT Fire Service Organizations

The first thing you'll need to understand is what types of fire departments there are in Illinois. Illinois has over 1300 fire departments and not all are alike. There are predominately two categorizations of agencies: "Fire Departments" and "Fire Protection Districts." They both operate almost identically as far as the services they provide and how they recruit/hire firefighters, but the main difference is the type of governmental agency they are. The differences are as follows:

-  A "Fire Department" is an actual department of a city, town, or village, no different than a town's police department, public works department, etc. They are under the governance of that municipality's mayor or city board or council.
-  A "Fire Protection District" is an entirely separate unit of government from the towns they serve, and they are their own tax collecting body rather than relying on getting their funds from a municipality's budget. They usually have their own independent governing body of trustees. While they work closely with the towns they serve, they are not under the direction or management of those towns. For example, the Oswego Fire Protection District serves the village of Oswego, unincorporated Boulder Hill, parts of Yorkville, Montgomery, and portions of Grande Park in Plainfield.

Volunteer Departments

The majority of fire departments in the nation are volunteer departments. They're predominately located in rural/lower populated areas. While it may be easier to join a volunteer department than a paid one, most volunteer departments have specific rules and requirements to be a member, such as:

-  Living in the district they protect
-  Attending department training sessions and meetings on a regular basis
-  Helping with department events such as community services and fundraising.
-  Responding to emergencies on a regular basis.

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer firefighter, you should contact the ones in your area to see what their specific requirements are.

Paid-on-Call Departments

Paid-on-call departments, traditionally called P.O.C., are a hybrid of the Volunteer Department. POC's are generally volunteers when doing most support functions of the department, such as training activities, community events, meetings, etc., but when they respond and operate at emergencies, they get paid a wage either hourly or on a per-call basis. Because volunteer and POC departments are so similar, most POC departments have the same residency and recruitment requirements as volunteer departments.

If you're interested in becoming a POC firefighter, contact the ones in your area to see what their specific requirements are.

Part-Time Departments

Some departments employ part-time firefighters. This is different from most POC departments in that part-time firefighters may actually work on shift, which is to say they're actually working scheduled hours in the fire stations. They perform all aspects of the fire service, such as training, fire prevention activities, cleaning, and maintenance, etc., as well as responding to emergency incidents. They're typically paid hourly for the time they're working their assigned hours. Most part-time firefighters will also have jobs elsewhere, either inside or outside the fire service. If you're interested in becoming a part-time firefighter, contact the ones in your area to see what their specific requirements are.

Full-Time Departments

Many municipalities in higher populated areas have full-time firefighters. These are career firefighters who have gone through the testing process, met the requirements to make the eligibility list and were hired as a full-time employee of that municipality or Fire District. The testing process for full-time firefighters is a very in-depth process. Just know that getting hired on a full-time department isn't a matter of simply applying for that department any time of the year. Most complete their testing process every two years and during this process, they have an application period where anyone interested must apply. Once that time is up all applicants will go through several steps which can include:

- 🚒 Written exam
- 🚒 Physical ability exams
- 🚒 Medical physical
- 🚒 Psychological/polygraph exam

These steps may take several months, but after testing is complete, everyone who successfully passed all steps will end up on a candidate eligibility list, ranked in order of how they scored. The list will typically be good for two years.

Contract Firefighters or Paramedics

Some departments will employ what are called "contract" firefighters or paramedics. Being contract is typically a full-time job, but you're not an actual employee of the department you're working in. You would be hired by a private company that provides fire fighter & EMS services for a municipality or fire district via a "contract" The department pays the private company a fee for specific services and the private company pays you. You will work within the department, wear their uniforms and ride on their vehicles, but you would not be an employee of that department. The most common type of contract employees are firefighter/paramedics or paramedic only, but there are some contract non-paramedic firefighters out there.

It's far easier to get a contract job, than it is to be hired full-time through a municipality or fire district because private companies typically don't have the stringent testing process that a full-time department does. In most cases, the pay and benefits are considerably less. A great many career firefighters and paramedics got their start in the contract services. It's a great way to work in emergency services while you're still going to school and gaining experience.

Combination Departments

Some departments are considered combination, which means they're made up of any combination of the above types of fire fighter/paramedics. For example, there are departments that have a mixture of full-time and part-time personnel, departments that have contract personnel and volunteers, or a combination of full-time, part-time, and volunteers.

Age Limits

In Illinois most full-time departments require you to be between the ages of 21 to 35 to get hired. Some departments will allow someone over the age of 35 to get hired if they have credible full-time service in another Illinois department, but none will hire someone under the age of 21. The age limits for all other types of departments or contract services will vary from department to department. You will need to contact these departments to know for sure.



What Education or Training Do I Need to Become A Firefighter?

There's a lot of confusing information, or misinformation about what classes a person should take to work toward becoming a firefighter. The answer depends on what area of the state you live in. In more rural areas of the state where there are predominately volunteer

departments, you may have a better chance of getting on that department without any classes or certifications. They do this to help recruitment, and in turn will train the personnel in-house to achieve skills & certifications. But most paid departments will not hire someone, or even allow them to test for their department, without certain minimum required certifications or licenses. What these requirements are will vary from department to department, but could include:

- 🚒 Basic Operations Firefighter through the Illinois State Fire Marshal
- 🚒 Emergency Medical Technician – Basic licensure through Illinois Department of Public Health
- 🚒 Emergency Medical Technician – Paramedic licensure through Illinois Department of Public Health

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Training

EMS is a large part of the Illinois fire service. Just about all paid departments in Illinois, especially in the Northern Illinois area, require their firefighters to also be paramedics. In fact, most part-time departments, contract services, and even some POC and volunteer departments require their members to be paramedics, or at a minimum EMT-Basic.

Firefighter II or Basic Operations Firefighter Certification

The basic entry-level type of firefighter training in Illinois is called Basic Operations Firefighter (BOF). You may hear many people refer to this certification as “Firefighter II” because that’s what it was previously called, the name changed to BOF very recently. Most paid fire departments in the state require personnel to be certified as a FFII / BOF before they allow them to test or apply for their department.

Fire Science Degree

Many people believe that they have a better chance to get hired on a fire department if they get their degree in Fire Science, which is usually an Associates level degree at many community colleges. This in fact is not true. While many departments will give some preference points for applicants who have college credits, the fact is that an associate degree will not give you a large advantage when testing for career departments. Fire Science degrees are far more beneficial to existing veteran firefighters who are taking promotional exams within their own department because those promotional exams will give preference points for those who have degrees or may even require the degree to take the exam.

With that being said, if you’re just getting out of high school, you won’t be able to take a test for a career department until you are 21 years old. Going to community college to take Fire Science classes is not a bad idea as it will give you some exposure to the educational aspects of the fire service and earn you valuable higher education credits while you’re waiting to reach the age of 21. Some community colleges offer EMT-Basic classes which you will need to test and are usually offered within their Fire Science program.

Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT)




CPAT is a certification that some full-time departments require the applicant to have before they can apply for that department. It is a physical ability test you take through a third-party institution that will put the applicant through the test, which is comprised of very physically challenging obstacle course-type skills for time.

When the applicant successfully completes the testing, they will be issued a certification

card that has an expiration date. The departments that require the applicants to have CPAT will require proof when applying. When the card expires the applicant can go through the testing again to recertify as needed. The cost of CPAT is usually the responsibility of the individual. As stated above, only a few dozen departments in Illinois require CPAT testing, but more and more departments are beginning to require it. If you plan on testing for full-time departments, you should obtain CPAT certification well before a department begins the application process because obtaining CPAT may take a few weeks, and you don't want to miss an application deadline simply because you didn't get CPAT in time. Have it ahead of time.

Where Should I Begin?

A good place to start once you've made the decision to become a firefighter is to obtain the certifications and education that most paid departments in the state require. These are:

-  Firefighter II / Basic Operations Firefighter
-  EMT-Basic
-  Followed by the EMT-Paramedic.

We call these programs "The Big Three" because they're an absolute must for most paid departments in the state. Some volunteer or POC departments may not require one or more of these three programs, but if you do obtain them, it would make you a much more desirable candidate.

More and more, career departments are starting to require the CPAT to test for their department. If you're planning to become a career firefighter then you should obtain CPAT certification after your education, but just before you start the testing process. With the addition of CPAT, the required programs now become "The Big Four." If your goal is to work as a volunteer, part-time, or contract department then chances are a CPAT will not be needed.

We get many calls from people who want to become firefighters, asking which program they should take first. We always recommend that they first go to EMT-B school and obtain that license. The length of the typical EMT class depends on where you take it, but on average it is about 4 – 6 months or 1 college semester. The reason being is because some departments may accept you without having the FFII/BOF certification, but just very few will take you on without being at least an EMT. EMS incidents outnumber fire incidents by about 5 to 1, so fire departments cross-train their firefighters to also work on the

ambulance. It's more cost-effective to have one employee qualified to do both jobs. This has become the overwhelming trend in the fire service.

Another reason to obtain your EMT license first, is because you can work as an EMT on a private ambulance company or in an emergency room. They're not very high paying jobs but they do allow you to work in an environment where you can utilize your new medical skills. If you choose to continue to Paramedic School, your employment opportunities and pay will increase.

Paramedic school usually lasts about a year. During that time, you'll have to attend regular classroom sessions and will also have to complete hundreds of hours riding on ambulances for field time and shifts in numerous departments of a hospital, such as the emergency room, ICU, labor & delivery, pediatrics, cardiac care units, etc.

Most paramedic schools are run through certain EMS resource hospitals. Community colleges may also hold paramedic schools as a partnership with hospital programs offered in a traditional college semester format.

Paramedic licensure is especially important not just to your potential fire service career, but there are other jobs that can be had as a paramedic such as in an emergency room, doctor's offices, private ambulance services, insurance companies, security field, etc.

Lastly, you'll need to obtain your BOF certification. You can do so in one of two ways; either as a member of a fire department or as a non-affiliated "civilian" student. The time required may vary depending on if it's a part-time or full-time academy. The BOF Academy is a pseudo-boot camp style entry-level course for firefighters. It gives the students the necessary basic skills and education needed to begin their fire service career. It by no means is an all-encompassing course that teaches you everything you need to know to be a firefighter. You will be required and expected to continue your education as you make your way through the fire service.

We hope this information gives you a little better idea of what's expected for you to start your fire service career in Illinois. We wish you luck.

Resources

Waubonsee Community College
www.waubonsee.edu



College of Dupage
www.cod.edu



Southern Illinois University
www.siu.edu



Illinois Fire Service Institute
www.fsi.illinois.edu



Romeoville Fire Academy
www.romeoville.org/153/Fire-Academy

